

# Summary of Brookings Institution's discussion: China's Arctic activities and ambitions

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## Key Points

- Russia, China and the USA further seek to establish stronger footholds in the Arctic region for strategic, economic or environmental reasons.
- The Nordic states desire the Arctic to remain a low-tension zone and are adopting a ‘dual approach’ by answering to the US’s demands while being transparent with Russia.
- Russia is overall perceived as an actor of greater strategic importance than China, but it still poses a matter of concern.

## Summary

This Brookings Institution’s discussion was hosted by Bruce Jones who is, among other titles, the Director for the Project on International Order and Strategy. It hosted three other members: Heather A. Conley, the Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Camilla T. N. Sørensen who is an Assistant Professor at the Royal Danish Defence College and Jim P. DeHart, the U.S. Coordinator For The Arctic Region. This discussion focused on debating China’s Arctic ambitions in light of a recently released report made by Rush Doshi, Alexis Dale-Huang, and Gaoqi Zhang titled “Northern expedition: China’s Arctic activities and ambitions”.<sup>1</sup>

Jones’ opening statement underlined that the debate surrounding the Arctic is enshrined by three perspectives: commercial, geopolitical, or environmental. He continued by adding that any actor with a serious presence in the region has a mix of all three, but stated that Russia is more geopolitical in nature, the European Union’s is split in viewing it as a global commons issue while the Chinese Communist Party’s view is geopolitical, yet that is debated.

DeHart started the discussion by reflecting on the USA’s interests over the Arctic, which are “close to home” not least due to Alaska’s proximity. **He said that the US’s interests are focused on climate change matters and sustainable economic solutions, while also wishing for the Arctic to remain peaceful.** He continued saying that other actors see things differently, thus a comprehensive approach is needed and that the Arctic’s rather peaceful status quo cannot last since its melting opens new opportunities, especially geopolitical ones for Russia and China. In response to China’s pursuit in building infrastructure in the Arctic to establish

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<sup>1</sup> Doshi R., et al., “Northern expedition: China’s Arctic activities and ambitions”, Brookings Institution, April 2021, Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/northern-expedition-chinas-arctic-activities-and-ambitions/>

a foothold, he underscored three principles the US responds with based on the 2021 “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”<sup>2</sup>: reinforcing the rule of law, strengthening allied response and combining foreign policy with domestic investments.

Sørensen offered the perspective of the Scandinavian states, which do not necessarily share the USA’s concern over China to the same degree and instead desire a low-tension future for the Arctic despite it becoming a new stage for superpower competition. Alongside the US and Russia building militarily, Denmark, Norway and Finland are also doing so, however, they underline it doesn’t strain cooperation. **Denmark and Finland’s “dual approach” strategy, where it is transparent to Russia about its military movements but still responding to the USA’s demands, is being increasingly strained by the competition among the two.** The Nordic states’ concern over China varies, with Sørensen giving Finland’s proactivity against it as an example. This variety, she stated, is because there is still a need to work with China over various development projects, even if risks are acknowledged. She ended by clarifying that Greenland is not influenced by massive Chinese investments and that while China’s importance is not downplayed, Greenland’s politicians are more aligned to the West.

Conley added that the USA’s main strategic priority is, above all, Russia’s militarisation. **Since the Arctic’s temperature increases, the concept of “Arctic Exceptionalism” where tensions could not grow in the Arctic is increasingly set aside due to the recent understanding of superpower competition in the region; she also made a point that there are little means for managing the tensions.** She highlighted the difference between Russia’s militarisation and China’s more long-term retention policy. The USA does not have the means to discuss with Russia both of their buildups; while China’s intentions are to not be excluded from the Arctic region due to economic and scientific interests. However, since they pose dual-use capability, they remain a cause of concern for the US and thus they will demand further transparency.

The discussion concluded with a Q&A focused on regional militarisation, Russia-China cooperation, climate change cooperation and mediation. DeHart and Sørensen agreed that the Arctic was long militarised, but Sørensen adds that the non-superpower nations are showing interest in the Arctic which complicates the issue. Conley concluded that there needs to be

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<sup>2</sup> The White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, The White House, 3 March 2021, Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>

more dialogue between superpowers to avoid misunderstandings. **On Russian-Chinese cooperation, DeHart states it is transactional, since Russia requires Chinese investments to develop its hydrocarbon industry, but remains wary about Chinese desires for Arctic access.** Sørensen also agreed, stating that what pushes the two to cooperate is the pressure the US puts on East China and Russia's neighbourhood. But Conley disagreed, stating that the two have military exercises more often and they share a mutual economic interest. Concerning climate change cooperation, Conley and Sørensen had agreed that Chinese interests in the Arctic must remain transparent as the members collaborate to tackle climate change. DeHart also emphasised the importance of transparency when working with China, so as to ensure Chinese research does what it claims it does, and all three had agreed that a lot more can be done on cooperation through the Arctic Council. **Regarding the sustainability of the current Arctic Council, Conley agrees that it is getting overwhelmed with all the different issues it must tackle and that the agreements are done mostly outside the Council.** Sørensen adds that the Nordic states acknowledge the Council's inability to deal with hard security issues and that they want to pursue a more multipolar approach. DeHart responds by questioning how big should the Arctic Council be and whether the increasing amount of observers is beneficial or not for it. He concluded by stating that the Arctic Council is also supplemented by various international laws, such as the Law of the Sea, that help it maintain its relevance.

You can find the discussion here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QWCZGO9fGE>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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